



FROM ANCHORAGE TO FAIRBANKS BY RAIL

BY SHELLEY SEALE

AS THE TRAIN PUSHED through the dense evergreen forest, the conductor's voice crackled through the intercom system. "Folks, we are approaching a spot that, with the beautiful sunny day, is going to give us a clear view of Mount Denali," he said. "If you'd like to move to the viewing platforms, I'll stop the train for a few moments so everyone can have a good look and a chance for photographs."

The railcar rounded a smooth bend, and the trees impeding our view fell away. We entered an open space surrounding a marshy lake, and there before us was the snow-capped peak of North America's tallest mountain.

I was making an overland journey in one of the last great frontiers of the world. Two-and-a-half times larger than the second-biggest state of Texas, Alaska's size is mighty; yet inhabited by only around 700,000 people, it lies mostly unpopulated – even unexplored.

The adventure started a few days before in Anchorage, which had been blessed with several unseasonal days of clear, blue skies. The weather had given

me my first glimpse of Denali from the city some 210 kilometers away – a rare sighting indeed, according to the locals. The imposing mountain is paradoxically elusive. Clouds, mist, rain and snow create a hide-and-seek show with its summit during much of the year; in fact, the 6,100-meter-high peak is only visible to one out of three visitors and when it does appear, it does so in dramatic fashion.

I spent one day in Anchorage before boarding the Denali Star, one of five routes on the Alaska Railroad. Riding the rails is a romantic notion, inspiring images of early pioneers and frontier explorers – not to mention, a fantastic way to get to Mount Denali and the 2.5 million hectares of protected national parkland that surround it. Railroad tracks were laid in Alaska starting in 1903, in the only ice-free coastal town in the State, Seward. Within the next couple of decades, more than 750 kilometers of railway was laid between here and Fairbanks.

As the flagship train, the Denali Star departs each day in summer for a 12-hour journey between Anchorage and Fairbanks, with several stops en route. It was about a third of the way into the journey when our conductor paused

briefly for us to appreciate the vivid appearance that Denali had decided to make that day.

Local guides onboard offered-up facts about the nature and the wildlife that surrounded us as we made our way along, and shared stories about Alaska, its history and its people. I learned how the great sled dog race, the Iditarod, started: Initially, the dogs were used as a mail and supply transport in these icy areas that no other vehicle could access. In 1925, the city of Nome experienced a devastating diphtheria epidemic. These dogs and their mushers raced to take in the life-saving serums, and thus began what is called, "The Last Great Race on Earth." Other stories were told of intrepid pioneer families who did, and still do, make their homes deep in the Alaskan woods.

We eventually pulled into Denali National Park & Preserve, where I went on to spend a few days. The third-largest national park in the country (the first two, Wrangell-St. Elias and Gates of the Arctic, are also in Alaska) is a vast wilderness accessible by only one road through a low-elevation forest to the high alpine tundra that culminates at the mountain.



Several bus options (narrated tours, non-narrated and hop-on, hop-off shuttles) take visitors all the way along the 150-kilometer park road with stops at the various lookout points, trailheads and rest areas. Even the courtesy shuttle drivers provide a good deal of information along the route, keeping an eye out for wildlife such as moose, caribou, Dall sheep, wolves and grizzly bears (always an exciting sighting); and stopping to allow passengers to enjoy the animals in their natural habitat. For those who prefer the heel-toe express, hiking trails that set-off from the visitor's centre are plentiful enough that you can often feel like the only person under the forest canopy, trekking alongside streams and canyons.

The Denali Star takes you onward to Fairbanks, known as the "Golden Heart of Alaska" (the city was founded because of the discovery of gold in the early 1900s, hence the nickname). This vibrant river city has a quaint downtown with an artistic heart, and a rich Native American culture, woven together by Alaska's pristine nature.

Summertime brings the Midnight Sun Festival, celebrating one of the longest

days of the year in mid-June with live music, food and artisan vendors. The Summer Arts Festival promises to awaken your inner artist with workshops and performances over a two-week period.

It's in Fairbanks that I'm gob-smacked by colours dancing across the night sky, bearing witness to one of the most natural wonders, the Northern Lights. Its geographical location directly under the "aurora oval" makes it one of the most reliable places to see this phenomena, which is nothing short of majestic – a perfect representation for Alaska overall. ✪

When You Go

WHAT TO SEE: There are an immeasurable number of bucket list activities to enjoy, with Fairbanks as your hub. Firstly, it's one of the best places to see the Northern Lights, so if this is part of your plan, schedule a visit for **Aurora Season**, Aug. 21 to April 21. Secondly, **The Arctic Circle** is 315 kilometers north of Fairbanks. Tour year-round up the Dalton Highway, also known as the Haul Road, and cross over that invisible line that puts you in the company of ice road truckers, Alaska

pipeline workers and other intrepid travellers.

WHAT TO DO: Experience the Golden Heart City by visiting the largest public display of gold in the State at the **University of Alaska Museum** of the North, or try your hand at gold panning. Alaska's native culture is also inherent to the fabric of Fairbanks, so visitors should see Alaska Native performing arts like drumming, dancing and fiddle playing in locales around town and during events. Adventurous travellers can visit remote villages and experience the resourcefulness and lifestyle of Interior and Arctic peoples. Adventure enthusiasts might consider exploring the **Chena River** via an authentic sternwheeler cruise or by canoe, raft or kayak.

WHERE TO DINE: Salmon. King crab. Halibut. Fresh Alaskan seafood such as this can be found in many of the restaurants around the Fairbanks and Denali area, often paired with locally grown produce. Worried about going hungry? Pay a visit to an all-you-can-eat outdoor salmon bake where the only limit is the notches on your belt.